

2-25-2001

Inner-city creativity - Kids from the streets learn new avenues of expression

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Recommended Citation

Gray, Channing, "Inner-city creativity - Kids from the streets learn new avenues of expression" (2001). *Broad Street Studio*. 13.
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Bringing the arts to the inner city

Continued from the cover

Programs such as Community MusicWorks and New Urban Arts are unusual in that they are not outreach components of some larger non-profit looking for a conscience or a way to make their grant applications seem sexier.

The idea behind these grass-roots efforts is to be accessible, which is to say free and based in the community as support for kids when they hit rough patches in their lives.

Ruth had been toying with the model for his project ever since his student days at Brown, when he studied under education reformer Ted Sizer. Could music, could the discipline and pride that comes from mastering an art form, be used to change lives?

He was able to persuade Brown's Swearer Center to underwrite a resident string quartet that would be based in the city's low-income neighborhoods, not coming from "high on the hill." Besides Ruth, who usually plays viola in the quartet, the members are violinists Minna Choi and Ben Rous, plus cellist Heath Marlow, who comes down from Boston each week to teach.

Ruth figured he'd meet with at least initial resistance from residents, who might feel he had an agenda or who needed time to check him out. But when he walked into the West End Community Center and told Goode what he had in mind, Goode snapped up the proposal.

Goode, a longtime community organizer, was willing to give Ruth a chance. But even he was "shocked," he says, when parents rushed to sign their kids up for lessons. These are youngsters who've been reared on rap and hip-hop, not Haydn and Beethoven.

Today the program gives free lessons to 50 students in the South Side, West End Elmwood and Olneyville. Another 30 are on the waiting list, and the West End Community Center is starting to talk about building Ruth a music room.

Others are starting to notice the program, too. Contributions are already twice what they were for all of last year. Ruth has not wanted to go looking for major support until he established a track record. He has also tried to resist growing too fast, thus risking a falloff in quality.

While teaching violin to poor kids with little exposure to the arts might seem unusual, Ruth doesn't think so. It may just seem that way because no one else has tried.

"It's dangerous the way we stereotype inner-city kids," said Ruth, who grew up in the small college town of Ithaca, N. Y., where his father is a teacher. "Where do we get that information?"

"Like any culture, people have desires. And kids are no different, except in this case they're totally passionate about violin."

come up with a project that works with people in the community. This spring, for example, students from New Urban Arts will create a piece of outdoor public sculpture for the Woonasquatucket Greenway, an area bordering the river that's being spruced up for public use. It runs from Providence Place to Olneyville.

Sister Ann Keefe

The push to bring art programs to the inner city actually began a decade ago, when Sister Ann Keefe, a community activist working out of St. Michael's Church on Oxford Street, went looking for a summer program to keep kids off the streets.

The story goes that Sister Keefe was sitting in her car one sweltering summer afternoon when youngsters surrounded the vehicle and began rocking it in a playful fashion. Wasn't there a way to channel all that energy into something more creative and rewarding?

After a series of meetings with parents, police and community leaders, it was determined that despite the flourishing downtown arts scene, there was a shortage of cultural activities in the neighborhoods.

"We have good arts programs around here," said Sister Keefe, "but they cost a pretty penny, and they are not in the community."

Five years ago, CityArts moved from St. Michael's into a 30,000-square foot manufacturing building at 891 Broad St. The place needs lots of work but has great potential. A half-dozen studios are under construction at the rear of the building for professional artists from the community. They would serve as examples, and be on hand to help students.

The building also serves as home to the Sol Gallery, which features mostly Latino and African-American



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WENDOLYN CEDENO, 10, right, waits to practice at Community MusicWorks; in the background is Claudia Espino, 9.

artists. While the gallery is open to the public, it's also a place where CityArts's 180 students can check out the work of professional artists and catch gallery talks and workshops.

At this point classes are being offered in ballet, Caribbean dance, drumming, ceramic and photography, among others.

Plans also call for a sculpture garden in the lot at the rear of the building, and perhaps the most intriguing component, turning a large garage space into an industrial arts studio. That would be run in conjunction with AS220, which has already moved into a space not far from CityArts on Broad Street.

Bert Crenca's view

AS220's Bert Crenca had been teaching at the state Training School and was impressed with the arts programs for the kids locked up there. But he wondered: What happens to these kids once they get out?

When he went to discuss this issue with Brother Michael Reis of Tides Family Services, which is located in the former Donnelly's clothing store, he noticed a 3,000-square-foot heated garage. Last month, the Broad Street Studio opening in that space, giving arts classes to about 15 youngsters who have been at the Training School.

"Give us three or four months," said Crenca, "and you'll be hearing about this place."

"If we can channel their passion and energy into making art, you'll see

some meaningful stuff come out of here."

Crenca insists teachers first work in the Training School so they will be familiar with issues facing these youngsters and to better develop bonds with them. "These kids don't feel right about a place," he said, "they don't come back."

Crenca is talking about teaching more marketable skills at CityArts, things such as welding, glassmaking and audio-visual classes. He'd like to see the students develop a product line, too.

stick with it until the next recital, that she could quit then if she wished.

It was at the concert that she met a man who told her he once had a son who played the violin and wanted to quit. When she found out the man was Ruth's father, she understood

she was not alone in her feelings, and started to practice again.

Ruth said she was one of the first to sign up for lessons this year.

"Just to have a project that lasts from third grade through high school," said Ruth, "something you don't get in school, is one of the compelling reasons for a program. This can provide structure and a supportive community for a child, and that's pretty powerful."

"But it's also an art form, mechanical but imaginative. And that transfers to life. It helps children conceive of bigger opportunities for themselves...."

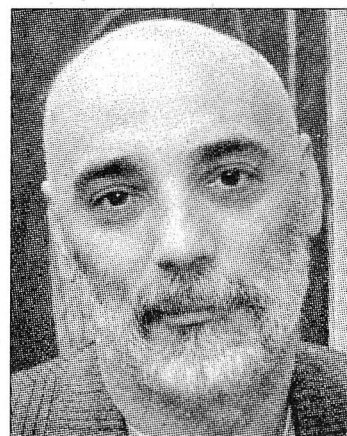
"If there's someone pushing me and encouraging me, what else can I do? If I can learn a whole song in one lesson, what else is out there for me?"

To reach Community MusicWorks, call 831-2190 or write Sebastian Ruth at 30 Messer St., Providence, 02909.

Project New Urban Arts is at 743 Westminster St., 02903. Call 751-4556.

For information on programs offered by CityArts, 891 Broad St., call 941-0795.

Joelle Jensen is head of youth services for AS200, 115 Empire St., 02903. She's at 454-3951 (or Joelle@as220.org) and can fill you in on the arts group's Broad Street Studio.



JOURNAL PHOTO / FILES

BERT CRENCA: "You'll be hearing about this place."

